INTERVIEWEE: ED PEARL

INTERVIEWEE: Victor Cohen

DATE: April 11, 2009

VC: So it's the 11th of April and I'm here talking with Ed. I wanted to ask you, Ed, about how you got involved with the Panthers back in the day. How'd that come up?

EP: I told you that I directed the registration drive for –

VC: Yeah, you mentioned it.

EP: For Peace and Freedom, in '67. At that time, the Peace and Freedom Party didn't exist. The Peace and Freedom Movement existed, but as a political party, we hadn't made the ballot. So there was no real organization. There was a registration director in each county, where we could get a team in there.

And also, there were fights like what I had been describing, which you didn't record, between people with different ideologies. The two polar ideologies were Bob Avakian, founder of the Revolutionary Communist Party, or the Revolutionary Union, initially. But before that, it was Bob and it was Jack Weinberg, who was the guy that sat in the police car, you know, started the Free Speech Movement, when

Mario Savio got on top of the car, and the speeches, and all that. Anyway, Jack was the person who was willing to go to jail to bust the ban on political literature on Sproul Walk, Sproul Plaza. Bruin Walk, Sproul Plaza, right. I went to UCLA, so it's Bruin Walk. Sproul Plaza in Berkeley. Which also I started at, but couldn't afford to stay more than a semester.

So Bob and Jack asked me to decide between a strategy on out-of-state organizing. And the two theories, it was very interesting. I mean, I swear I had never been in a political thing before, and to have these two brilliant minds asking me to decide things when I had never considered the question. (laughs) It was really challenging. And the major question was whether you went into a community, or a state, or a city with an organization that wanted you to come in, or whether you just went in there and started organizing. Jack was for the building on top of an organization that already had everything, and Bob was for going into a community and just creating something whole cloth.

In a way, I sort of went Bob's way myself with the Ash Grove, initially, starting something and then – but still, I tested it out. I wasn't there initially. I mean, I knew what I wanted, but I wasn't there initially, mainly because I didn't have an option to be that. There

wasn't a reservoir of traditional players waiting to play. So I started off with most commercial blues, Brownie McGee, Barbara Dane, the Limeliters, Bud and Travis, whatever. But, I mean, also with good stuff. So I created a base and then went there.

Bob was talking about going in in September or October and starting something right then. And it took me a while to figure it out. That means that you would be taking people that really – I hadn't really thought it all through, but I just had an intuition that it would be a lot of energy and you'd probably wind up with a lot of people who would just do what you said, because it was a good idea, but didn't really necessarily have ties to other organizations, whatever. It's not like going into an organization that had already thought about it and had ties already, whether they're loose or tight or whatever relationships with lots of people, and thought in an organized way because that's what they were part of. So I voted for Jack's way. I think Bob kind of struck out on his own after a while.

VC: Was he involved with the Peace and Freedom Party?

EP: Yes.

VC: As a member of the – as anything? Or the Revolutionary Union came after –

EP: No, no, no, the Revolutionary Union was afterwards. No, he just –

VC: How old was he?

EP: Very young. I mean, he was definitely in his twenties. He had a beautiful girlfriend named Connie, just – oh, God. I mean, I had a beautiful girlfriend, wife, too, but – anyway, they were very different. Anyway, so – that's an aside.

He wound up – he went on a trip or a tour with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, in which he would give a political talk or something like that during intermission or afterwards. They were doing that for a while. Then Tom Hayden did that also for a while. But Bob did that.

During that time, they began having meetings with the Black Panther Party, and other than Jack, I can't remember – I think Mike Parker was also in the Independent Socialist Organization. Then the International Socialists came down. Now it's the ISO. After a while, the IS sort of became defunct, but then a couple of people in the IS started this thing that now exists called the ISO.

VC: Right. And that's a Trotskyist group.

EP: Well, it's a group that is more Trotskyist than – definitely more than the Communist Party, but –

VC: Right. But it's not the –

EP: Yeah. It's not a really – it basically is an independent – it really is a different kind of politics. I mean, like _____ is not a standard Trotskyist, he's a –

VC: No. That's right, he's not.

EP: So it's very different, and they were not welcome within the Trotskyist group. They had different politics. Anyway, so Mike Parker and Jack, probably Bob also, and then one other person, met with Huey and Bobby Seale and at a certain point invited me to come with them.

VC: Do you remember when that would have been?

EP: Yeah. That was '87.

VC: Eighty-seven?

EP: Pardon me, '67. October of '67. Or maybe a little later, maybe November, but October, let's say. Huey was in prison, but I met Bobby and the guy that did their cartoons, Emery Douglas. And then when I came back, Shermont Banks, the head of the Panther Party here, and a number of other people, a bunch of Carters, John Huggins, Ericka Huggins. So I began meeting the people there.

VC: Why were you guys meeting with the Panthers, as the Peace and Freedom Party?

EP: Oh, because we made an alliance with them, which is how Eldridge Cleaver became our presidential candidate in '68.

VC: Why did you make alliance with the Panthers?

EP: Why? As an advanced party of young African Americans based in cities that – see, at that time, they had not yet been slaughtered by the police departments. Although they made their mark by doing the patrolling of police and legitimated their right initially to carry weapons, they had not used any weapons and were actually quite effective in checking police for a while, until the police started shooting them. But, no, Huey I guess being in jail, what I'm saying is not absolutely true.

But nonetheless, they had a lot of _____ in them and an advanced relationship. There was no other organization that wasn't attached to the Democratic Party already, completely, the NAACP, you know, people had a much older leadership and low on established ties with Democratic Congress people. Some of them were in Congress, whatever. All of the groups. The church groups, and so on. And here was this group of young ghetto blacks that were political and open to it.

I wound up being Eldridge's campaign manager in L.A. County. And he made mincemeat out of anyone that – I mean, nobody would debate him, but –

VC: How come?

EP: Eldridge? Because he was brilliant. I'll never forget the first press conference I ever went with him to, the first one in Los Angeles. I mean, the entire press cadre was there, and they were hostile, and Eldridge simply dominated them. And at a certain point, they began eating out of his hand, because they had nothing, all of their questions, and he talked the truth about the black condition and what was happening in Vietnam. He made all the connections, and he made it in his very forceful, poetic, brilliant style. That's not to say I approve of Eldridge's politics (laughs) or anything, but as a candidate, he was formidable.

I'm skipping way ahead, but the other person that was – there were two other candidates. One of them was Paul Jacobs, who was a pacifist, who died. He was a newspaper reporter who did a lot of coverage of the development of the atomic bomb. He spent a lot of time in New Mexico at the site. What's the name of the site there?

VC: Alamogordo?

EP: Maybe. It doesn't matter. So anyway, he actually got cancer from spending a lot of time in New Mexico around the test sites and whatnot. And the other one was Dick Gregory, who was a third candidate. So, more conservative people. And I was already becoming a socialist under the Socratic tutelage of Jack. I saw Dick Gregory run as a four-forty runner. He ran for Illinois. He was a great runner, before he became an air eater. I can't remember _____. (laughs) When he was in college I was a kid. I remember seeing him because we used to go to all the sports things, and I remember seeing him running at the Coliseum. He was a great athlete. He was wonderful. And he's funny. I really like him. But he had erratic politics, to put it modestly. But anyway, so that was the split. So Eldridge won the nomination.

VC: And this is to be the presidential candidate for the Peace and Freedom –

EP: Yeah, he was the presidential candidate. And he went all over the country and did a lot of speaking, and all that. A funny thing about that. Not funny. I remember watching the results come in, and you know they always have the results coming in from the eastern part of the country because they report first and they're in a different time zone. Eldridge got like seven or eight percent, with a certain number of people. That number never changed, even after they went to the center

of the country and then to the Pacific Coast. They never changed that number. And Eldridge wound up with like two percent or something like that.

But they were afraid, and they cooked the books. I'm absolutely certain of it. It may be that they increased it a little bit, so I'm not absolutely correct, but I'm telling you, I saw the early returns. I'll never forget it because I really made phone calls, blah, blah, blah. Look at this and that. And I had it written down. So what I'm telling you I'd swear by.

Well, anyway, so back to '67 when all this started. That's what Avakian and Mike Parker and Jack Weinberg had in mind.

VC: Was Peace and Freedom mostly white folks?

EP: Yes. There were a number of African Americans in Peace and Freedom, and they did not want to be identified with the Panthers, I mean at least some of the ones who complained about _____, because Eldridge and Bobby weren't their leader. They made it very clear. We didn't have a black organizer in the black community. I mean, it would have been strange. Maybe not now, but at that time it simply would have been strange because the Panthers were having this massive impact starting in '66, I think, when they first went to Sacramento. And

young people, and a lot of young gang bangers, were very attracted to them, and seemingly political, seemingly doing – and putting their bodies where their heads are. So we followed them a lot. We supported Huey's case when he got out, and so on. Anyway, we did all these things.

VC: Was any of this stuff showing up at the Ash Grove?

EP: Oh, yeah.

VC: In what ways?

EP: Well, the Panther paper was distributed there. I was the distributor for L.A. Or at least I picked up a bunch of them and got them around the city, through myself and other people, and put them in the Ash Grove also. So that was one thing. They came to meetings at the Ash Grove.

VC: So the Ash Grove –

EP: Well, no, no. Just I let it open to the Peace and Freedom Party during the week. If we didn't have a show on a Tuesday night or a Wednesday night, then there could be one or two meetings going on.

Then I did a prison – after the demise of the Peace and Freedom Party, which really just lasted up until Eldridge's campaign – it really lasted from – it was big news, you know the young Turks in '67, and Eugene McCarthy wasn't really a threat to us, but Bobby Kennedy was.

And when Kennedy declared, then huge numbers of people, regular white folks, middle-class people, deserted the Peace and Freedom Party.

I was aware of that and I sort of organized – I remained in the Peace and Freedom Party, but you could see that it was eviscerating. And as the regular folks deserted, the crazies not only became more obvious but began acting up more. And at a certain point I just stopped going to the thing. I mean, after we lost the election and Nixon was elected – well, our first meeting was in like January of '68, and that was really big. It was at Berkeley and it was a lot of people. I went to national meetings and all of this kind of stuff. But you could just see one thing after another. The number of people coming to these meetings went down. People just didn't have the staying power. We hadn't really built an organization before it started to be eviscerated by all of these deaths that happened.

VC: The deaths? What do you mean?

EP: Well, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., of Robert Kennedy. I'll tell you three interesting stories. Jack had coined the phrase, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." That was his phrase. Not that he really believed that, but the slogan gave a real dimension to this young group of

college activists, or to any young group doing anything. It was like a youth identification. It was really an important concept. He's a very smart guy, very smart. He had a Ph.D. in math.

So Kate and I and Jack and Norma Whittaker, who was his girlfriend at the time, we celebrated Jack's thirtieth birthday at our house in Santa Monica. We turned on the radio and Martin Luther King had just been assassinated. It was just – I'll never forget – I mean, we were celebrating his birthday and kidding him about his don't trust anybody sort of thing. And somebody turned on the radio.

I drove down to the Ash Grove as soon as I could, because I had Merle Travis on, and that would have been a major problem. I mean, just the idea of having a show, and particularly country music, and somebody I really adored, Merle. So I drove down to the Ash Grove and left the others at home. Merle, ever the gentleman, said he would do whatever I said. I said, "Merle, I don't think it's a very good idea to play tonight, do you?" "No," he says, "I really don't feel like playing." And so we canceled it, canceled the show. That's just a little aside.

The other one was, Kate had been teaching in Synanon, which was an anti-drug rehabilitation thing that a man named Chuck Dietrich, a former alcoholic, had founded, and it was extremely popular and

powerful. They had this huge building right where Pico hits – at the end of Pico, right where the beach is, there was this huge hotel, with a swimming pool and everything. Well, that was Synanon. On the left side. It was a great hotel built in the twenties, with bricks and all that. The school was a little bit up the street.

But anyway, as part of that, they expected her to play the game, which was this circle of people that would talk to people about – primarily dope addicts, former dope addicts – about breaking down some of the things that had driven them to do that, whether it's genetic or cultural, whatever. And it was absolutely no holds barred. And they did have black intellectuals and brown intellectuals and white intellectuals and working class people, and just everything. But it was just merciless and brilliant and –

I'll tell you something. I sort of became an alcoholic after the Ash Grove. I mean, I was drinking a lot. When I stopped ten years later, I've never wanted another drink, so maybe I'm not a real alcoholic. And occasionally, I've had a drink by accident, or like there's brandy in – whatever. And I never felt the desire to feel that way again because that's – and at a certain point it was really hard to

stop, until I thought I was going to die, or something close to it. So I drank increasingly heavily for ten years.

I started going to AA, and I quit after about four or five sessions, maybe a little more, but not much more. Half a dozen. It was too sort of religious, and I thought I could do it without it. It was interesting, though, the first one I went to, at the intermission, recess, whatever you call it, a number of people came up to me who had been customers, and almost to a person – I don't know if it's true or not – they all said they got their first drink at the Ash Grove. I kid you not. That is true what I'm telling you. It was really funny. (laughs) The other thing was is that half of them said they got in for nothing, and that really pissed me off. I knew it, I knew it! You know what I mean?

VC: Right. So Synanon, you were saying.

EP: Yeah. But the Synanon example was so stirring within me. When it came time, you'd just hear people get up there and talk about they had a good day when they were, I don't know, otherwise, in their business relationships, murdering children or something. I mean, it was so just focused on the stopping drinking one day at a time, as opposed to this deep wrenching thing. I've seen people – like Bill Maher, his brother John was one of them, having real troubles. I mean, if I ever meet Bill,

I want to talk, because Johnny died about ten years ago, and I just wonder what his life was like after I knew him.

Anyway, but AA just didn't compare to Synanon. Somebody would say something that was obviously bullshit. I mean, at Synanon people would start laughing and someone would say "bullshit" and really – (laughs) The guy would have to go and really be honest. There was no way out. I'm not sure that that worked for everybody.

VC: No. I'm thinking that doesn't sound pleasant to me, but –

EP: It was not pleasant, but the thing was, people cried, people – and then they would all go and in that huge ballroom there would be a dance afterwards, and people would – it was all done to help you, and everyone loved you. So you were safe. So if you were being attacked, it was for your own good, and by masters. And there was no way out. And who were the masters? They were people that had been there from the beginning, and they had gone through the same thing. It was really quite a community. And then Chuck went a little crazy. That's another story. Money mad. I don't mean personal money mad, but power mad, expanding and buying businesses and all this kind of thing.

VC: Can I ask you, when you were doing stuff with the Panthers, and they would show up at the Ash Grove, did that cause friction with any of the other people, any of the other audiences?

EP: No. Then I did a thing on the prisoners.

VC: Oh, yeah, you were saying. When you say a thing on the –

EP: As Peace and Freedom broke down, we had a meeting at our house in 1971, or something like that, 1972. And invited a bunch of people that had been active in the Peace and Freedom Party that had also sort of begun falling away, and before I didn't have their phone numbers anymore, I brought them together and I said – no, that was in '69, right after the first fire. Already the Peace and Freedom was falling apart.

So I had this meeting and I said – for one thing, it turned out that all the people that I had invited were involved somehow in the arts. It was really phenomenal. I mean, it just – you went around the room and people talked about what they did. There were writers and producers and people that knew how to do things, creatively.

So we decided to – something I'd been thinking about, which was to actually begin trying to take what the Mime Troupe does but in another way. But actually to use traditional music and traditional – to use supporting things around real conditions, around real struggles. At

the time, the San Francisco State strike was happening, so people actually went up there. So we decided to give it a try and put on this thing at the San Francisco State strike. It was before the Ash Grove got burned down. That was our first project, because right after it I got burned down.

VC: Right. I remember you telling me that.

EP: Right. I just forgot the sequence. So it was '68 when we started, before I got burned down. I knew that it was time for us, for me, for the Ash Grove to begin – we had developed a culture throughout the country of younger people who were doing things that were active in making progressive change, but also with the best music, obviously. I won't go through all the people. And with acting groups, and so on, it was only maybe – the Jane Fonda movie, *Coming Home*, had already happened, or not.

But anyway, all of this stuff was in the cards. It was time to begin creating our own *Three Penny Opera*, and so on. That's what I wanted to do, so that's what this was. People went up there, and the most important person was Jerry Kay, my friend, who was working at the Ash Grove and went to head the farm worker thing in Florida, then New York, then became a farm worker, and so on. He's still my very

close friend. The one who's raised Ayana, who's doing the Ash Grove film, blah, blah, blah. And now just finished Jack Elliott's website, by the way. It's not done yet, but anyway.

He got a bunch of slides – or maybe I did. It doesn't matter. But anyway, so with Jerry and Gordy and _____ Gorton from Texas, and Ruthie Gorton, his wife, and a whole bunch of other people, we put together the show that was on that strike, using – what do you call it? The slide show on a circular –

VC: Oh, a loop?

EP: Well, no, no. Just it showed one slide after another. I forget the name of it. And a lot of stuff that was recorded, Hayakawa's speeches, various speeches by Danny Gray, who was an Ash Grove customer, by the way, who was the leader of that thing. He comes from Los Angeles and I knew him before he went to San Francisco State.

So we had all of that, and it was a huge success. And I got burned down. It seems like every time I did something good something terrible happened from then on. Really interesting. Then I did something else, I forget what. And then I did a prison show.

VC: How'd you come up with the prison show? I mean, was there something going on at the time, like the San Francisco State strike?

EP: I can remember when Attica happened. That is in my memory. But I'm not sure that that was the trigger. A person named John Hunt, a filmmaker – another sad story of a brilliant mind who never fulfilled his promise. Somebody who really could have been John Ford. A vision and strength and all of that. I don't know what happened. I think he smoked too much dope. I'm not kidding.

So I think it was his idea. And it just fit in with the Panthers, and so on. So I engaged the Panthers. Elaine Brown performed. She was head of the Panthers at that time. Everyone else was in jail. I think she was. Or if not, it didn't matter. She was sort of a queen bee down here.

VC: Right. What was her performance?

EP: Elaine? She's a great singer and a great pianist. Period. She does not come from a ghetto family at all. She comes from a family that was bourgeois, and she was a classical pianist before she became a Panther.

VC: No kidding.

EP: Yeah. No, I'm not kidding.

VC: Wow. I didn't know that.

EP: So was John Huggins, so was Ericka Huggins. Kate and I had John and Ericka for dinner several times just to give them a break, which they were really happy to do, from doing the terrible work that they did, just

to sit around and talk about dance and music and art and stuff like that. Until John got killed, with Bunchy, by the US _____ group at UCLA.

VC: I just found out about that whole thing. I had no idea.

EP: Yeah, it was a disaster. Bunchy was the key organizer, and John was an important member. The cops went ahead and – as soon as they were killed, that night, they broke into their house and arrested Ericka, who had to yell to the neighbors to watch her kids. Can you believe that? Those bastards. Anyway.

VC: So when Elaine –

EP: Yeah, and they had a table and whatnot and a lot of good conversations.

Going back to Synanon, though, just a couple of things that related to the Panthers. These black intellectuals, I remember they brought in Jerry Brown, who was running for state Attorney General, or local District Attorney, or something like that. I can't remember. Anyway, Jerry Brown came and he spoke, and I thought he was full of shit, to be honest about it.

And then a member of the black intellectuals came from the Bay Area, and they were absolutely against the Panthers. They came down, and they were talking about this and that. One of the meetings was about – big meeting – was about the black movements and all that.

I think I told you that my former wife had some money. So she was a teacher there and she was a big donor, and we were treated on a very high level. I knew Chuck Dietrich, I knew all the leadership and all that, and I actually took it upon myself to kind of force the issue and got a speaking engagement for Bobby Seale to speak before the local Panther group at that beautiful huge hotel ballroom, with hundreds of people.

VC: When you say "force the issue," what do you mean?

EP: Well, I mean that in a meeting, what they called these groups, with Chuck and the leadership there, I talked about – I demanded that – if they're so confident – because they really believed that they were creating a new world. That was the fallacy of what happened between being a drug rehabilitation center. They started running businesses. And they did change people's characters. But their world was Synanon. If you weren't in Synanon – I don't know how they expected Synanon to encompass – whatever, for political power, but that was sort of – you know, people that aren't sophisticated politically and really very bright and powerful and doing all this successful work, that was their image of themselves.

So I brought down Bobby, who was really happy to come, and me and Shermont – Shermont Banks was the local part. Shermont and Bobby came to the house for dinner. We just lived a few blocks from Synanon. So we went down there. Chuck and the leadership had brought down every black intellectual from out of town that they could muster, like fifty, thirty, forty people. And Bobby took them all on. It was superb. It was just one of those things, like Eldridge talking to all the reporters, because all these people – it wasn't like they were white people attacking the blacks. These were black people, some of them from the ghetto. It's just that Bobby pointed out all the fallacies in what they're thinking, that the ghetto is not waiting for Synanon to come in, that what's happening is systemic and political on a vast level. Bobby, you have to understand, was a professional comedian – Bobby Seale – before he went into the Panthers.

VC: I didn't know.

EP: Yeah. He used to do the Comedy Club, and everything, up north. Very gifted, very good speaker, and he really believed. Moreover, he's a brilliant guy.

So we finish that and we go home. Then they stayed overnight. So then Shermont and I drove Bobby to the airport. On the way back,

we turned on the radio and the police had just raided Synanon. Not because the Panthers were there. Because – I think that Synanon – somehow it had to do around the issue of methadone. I don't know whether Synanon – Synanon would probably say you shouldn't take methadone. I don't know what happened, but it was a completely bogus raid. It doesn't matter. They didn't arrest anybody. They were searching for methadone. Maybe it was connected with the night before. I don't know.

But in any event, when we went there, walked in, every black person in the room came over to talk to Shermont Banks, the head of the Panthers then. We were stunned. They just congratulated – I mean, that was a testimony to the effect that Bobby had had on them the night before. He had introduced Shermont, of course, and Shermont had said a few words, but it was Bobby who did that. But Shermont was identified. And I walked in with him just because we were coming back from the airport. I said, "Shermont, do you mind if we swing by?" He said, "No. I'd like to see it." So we did.

VC: Right. Once the Panthers had sort of – like in L.A., after the raid on the headquarters and everything, how did that affect the – the Ash Grove you said was always very – there was no racial tension at all. But in

L.A., especially with the Watts Riots, did things change at the club? Or did you notice it was harder to work with people?

EP: It really wasn't. It really, honestly wasn't. That simply never affected what we did because the Ash Grove was sort of, I guess, a sacred place for people. If you came in, you came in accepting equality. No signs about that or anything. It just was. That's all. That's the way it opened and that's the way it stayed the whole time. The same as the pier. That's not part of my getup. It just isn't.

VC: But I mean the landscape itself.

EP: Well, I know for a fact that some people didn't come to the Ash Grove because it was becoming political, overtly political. So that, yes. But we overcame that. I mean, had I had my way about – had I not been burned down three times in a row, and so on and so forth, and had these – I mean, people really loved that first show. There were all these things, all this paraphernalia in the front room – it's a pretty big place – showing the dimensions of the struggle, and so on.

VC: You mean the _____.

EP: Yeah, the San Francisco State strike. And everyone got a little ticket signed. They had the demands of the strike. And then there were discussions afterward. So nobody was telling anybody what to think.

Let them talk what they wanted to. I never – I mean, there were facilitators, but there was no proselytizing, except for yourself. I mean, do you want to argue that Hayakawa didn't say that? I mean, go ahead. Whatever. I sat in on two or three of them, and it was all friendly, because everyone's aware that ladies in fancy coats, they're going to have a different opinion, and people tried to communicate. I never saw anyone being dissed, the way in a political meeting people get up and yell at people.

VC: Yeah, right. What about the prison event?

EP: The prison event was really good and was successful. It wasn't as big as the first one, but it was big and it was good. I can't remember the figures. I can look it up. And had another one about the coal mines.

VC: Yeah, you mentioned the Hazard strike?

EP: The Hazard strike, yeah, in '72. That was another good one with Alice and Hazel Dickens. Alice Stewart. Hazel Dickens is a well-known Appalachian singer. She plays Loretta Lynn's mother in that picture about Loretta Lynn.

VC: Right. *Coal Miner's Daughter*?

EP: *Coal Miner's Daughter*, yeah. Sissy Spacek. But she's a great traditional singer, and she was there. And George – Miller? I think, the

singing miner, had good songs and stories. Ralph Stanley, people like that. So it was a really good show. So I did all that kind of thing.

Then there was all the – you know, with the films and the artifacts from the strike and the history of it, and George – it wasn't Miller, I can't remember his last name – telling who was a participant and sort of the storyteller for the miners, who remembered in great folk tradition of somebody remembering the heart of the struggle and carrying it on to other generations, to another storyteller, plus the people.

Those things were wonderful and had I had sense enough to make money out of recordings, which I could have done earlier just by establishing a record company, if I had sense enough to do that, that place would probably still be going.

VC: Do you know of anyone around who has documentation of any of these events? Was anyone like snapping pictures or –

EP: No. The only event that had documentation was the first Women's Festival in the United States. That took place like '72 also. And that was filmed by Donna Deitch and Cyndi Fitzpatrick, Cyndi being a waitress and Donna being – Donna started out doing that just because

Jane Fonda was working on it with her, so she was doing – she wanted to do a Women's Festival with Jane Fonda, sort of.

VC: And that Women's Festival took place at the Ash Grove? Part of the festival went on at the Ash Grove?

EP: All of it. It was there for two weeks. They had poets and theater and film and music. It was really great. It was really a great event.

Michelle Shocked and I went to a party around Christmas, two parties. One was some guy making a film. It was a good party. The other one was Code Pink. And there was Donna. I hadn't seen Donna for a long time. It was really great, and we had a really wonderful reunion. Anyway, Donna produced the first lesbian film, called *Desert Hearts*. Even though she started out doing the Women's Festival, per se, and shot film of it, she wound up being inspired and dropping that right in the middle. For all I know, she has film of that, which would be really great. Really great stuff. Actually, thanks for making me remember that, because this is what Ayana has been dying for me to remember, sit down and remember film that – I couldn't remember anything. But I just did.

VC: That's Donna Deitch?

EP: Yeah.

VC: I'd love to see it anyway, as well, just to get a sense what –

EP: Maybe John has films of this prison show, too. It was his show.

VC: John Hunt?

EP: Yeah.

VC: Maybe.

EP: And Donna and Cyndi were friends of John. All of them coming from that first blush of activity coming out of the sixties movement, you know what I mean? So in '68, just people –

Another very interesting thing happened in '68. It was like at a certain point I'm just standing there in the Ash Grove doing my business and no fewer than a dozen people came up to me in the space of a week and said, "You know, I'm quitting my job. I'm going to be part of the movement." I'm not kidding. They're going to devote full time. And you sort of had a glimpse of what a revolutionary movement would be like. I mean, I'm just doing whatever I'm doing, and people are coming up, and I'm offering a confessional just by standing there. People just wanted some sort of encouragement, or to tell somebody what they were doing, some sort of approval, or whatever it is. And it really happened to me. It was like contagious.

So we all thought that there was a real chance for something. I mean, really, it was just – I can't remember exactly when it was. It's too bad because that would be a really important historical analysis or something. It was that trigger point that happened. It was after the killings, and maybe when it kept going and you knew that something had to be done about it. You know about the Chicago Twelve trial?

VC: Yeah. After the Democratic convention?

EP: Yeah. That was like '71?

VC: Well, the convention was '72. Or the election was '72, right?

EP: Right.

VC: The campaign was '72?

EP: That's right. Was it that one, or was it the '68 election?

VC: That's a good question. It might have been the '68.

EP: I really can't – anyway, because I remember producing that thing, and I got really ill and I couldn't even go to it. I had to call Gordy to take my place kind of. But we filled up the sports arena, the basketball arena, whatever it was, like in a week's notice. It was right after the verdict, so a number of the people were coming, and whoever was in jail, their wives came. There were two people, I can't remember who it was – what was the name of the lawyer?

VC: Oh, yeah. I know who you're talking about.

EP: Yeah. Bill – I can't remember. But anyway, so everyone was represented. Bobby Seales' mate came. I mean, people – there are times when these things happen, and it's just amazing to be part of it and see it.

VC: Did you ever have any events in support of the Weathermen or the Weather Underground?

EP: That's an interesting question, and answer, actually. After the Columbia takeover happened, Columbia struggle, which happened –

VC: Was that '68, too?

EP: Yeah. Anyway, so there was an evening with Mark Rudd. He got up on the stage of the Ash Grove, and in the course of his discussion, he was speaking I think against the Weathermen. Or no, he was talking about – because what he did, it was just shocking, actually. He says, "Well, does this make a revolution?" And he pulled his pants down and he was naked. (laughs) I can't remember who he was making fun of, but of course that remains indelible. It was startling. (laughs) He pulled them back up and he says, "No." (laughs) I can't remember whose side he was on, but he was definitely against doing a cultural whatever of – just flaunting. Not flaunting but flouting societal norms,

nonsense. But to say it is different than just pulling our pants down. That probably was sparked by somebody asking a question. Those things happened a lot, but no, not the Weathermen, per se.

VC: So there was never like a Prairie Fire?

EP: Well, Prairie Fire I think – didn't that happen a little bit later? Maybe not.

VC: I'm actually not clear on that. I mean, I know the Weathermen would have been '68, '69, so –

EP: Yeah, but then the Weather Underground. They changed their name. No. They never touched the Ash Grove. It just never happened. When I moved to Venice – the Ash Grove down November 11th, '73. On January 1st, '74, I moved to Venice. When I moved to Venice, I met people that were supporting Prairie Fire. I knew people sort of vaguely, they knew me, whatever. There was a group of – I'd never been in a group like that. A group of people who were community activists wanted to talk about where do we go from here, and two of them were very hot about the – two of them that became good friends of mine, except weren't very interested in the – were passionately devoted to Prairie Fire. No, the Ash Grove never –

VC: Yeah. I'm just curious.

EP: I mean, that I remember. I'm not there every night. I don't know what people were thinking. I didn't really care, to be honest about it.

VC: What do you mean?

EP: Well, I'd learned to weather the tides of all kinds of stuff in the fifteen and a half years that I was open, and there was no question that they were accepting the basic premise of the Ash Grove, as open as possible, of multi-class and multi-everything as possible. And the basic politics of the Ash Grove came from the lives and struggles of the people on stage. That's it. And no acting out, racism or anything. The rest of it – I wasn't emperor of the world, I was just head of the Ash Grove, so in that little space that could provide energy and inspiration for other people, that was what I did. Tried to do.

VC: We'll stop there. That's a good point to stop the tape.

[tape off, then resumes]

VC: All right. So it's still the 11th of April, and you were just saying something about taking Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley to –

EP: Yeah. The first time Doc came out, he was part of the "friends" part of Clarence Ashley and his friends. This was '62, probably, '61 or '62. I liked to take country people out to – I mean, they'd all heard of Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. I liked Knott's Berry Farm a lot

better than Disneyland, so I took them there. It was really great. We really had a great time.

Then this guy was selling some magic elixir to heal everything and hustling bottles of things there, and he started telling stories and this and that. I can't remember how it happened, but Clarence didn't want to leave his banjo in the car so he was carrying his banjo in a case. He was afraid somebody was going to steal it. Probably he was right. (laughs) But in this case, it was terrific because Clarence, after a while he said, "Say, son, you want to see how they really do it?" And the guy said, "Well, okay, sure." Clarence took out his banjo. And he was a professional grifter, that guy. He sold every bottle in that case. I mean, he was great. He sang songs, he made up stories about the magical powers, the sexual potency. Three people went to heaven and came back and told him that it was because of that elixir. God wanted a swig of it. It was that sort of country – he was incredible.

So I had a chance to see Clarence in his natural state, being a banjo-playing – a guy that was going to make his living as a young person playing the banjo of all things, for God's sake. What do you do? You tell jokes, you sell things. He was just wonderful. And he had

everyone in stitches. He had this huge crowd around him. (laughs) I can't remember the end of it, but it was just perfect.

VC: Wow. What did Doc Watson think of it all?

EP: Doc? He loved it.

VC: He didn't feel like it was patronizing, or kind of silly?

EP: What? Selling stuff?

VC: Oh, no. I just mean like Knott's Berry Farm.

EP: Oh, no. He loved it. He was with his two buddies, Fred and Clint, who were his neighbors that he played with all the time, had known them forever, and they were used to translating things for him. So he enjoyed the hell out of it.

VC: Wow. That's great.

EP: Of course, he could hear far better than I could.

VC: Right. Did Knott's Berry Farm have rides in those days like it does now?

EP: Yeah, it did.

VC: Did they go on the rides?

EP: Probably. Probably nothing spectacular. They enjoyed all of the old western part of it.

VC: Well, thank you for that.

EP: You're welcome.

[tape off, then resumes]

VC: Okay, it's still the 11th of April.

EP: So speaking first of Knott's Berry Farm, here's my Disneyland story connected with the Ash Grove. There was a great place kicker at USC named Tommy something-or-other, who became the head of Disneyland entertainment. So he called me up at the Ash Grove in I'd say '64 or '63 and wanted to meet me and invited me out to Disney headquarters in Burbank. So I went out there and I had lunch with him. What he wanted was, he wanted to start entertaining, live entertainment. So he wanted me to get him entertainers, country type. So sure, it was fine with me.

So, aside from getting a lunch and all that, he said, "Would you like a tour? Because here's where we develop the stuff for Disneyland." So he showed me this, he showed me that. And then we went into a hangar, and there was Walt Disney working with birds, and mechanic stuff like that. He was actually down on his knees working, fixing a bird, or whatever. And he got very angry at Tommy. He says, "How can you take somebody in here when the birds aren't perfect?" In other words, the illusion wasn't there, and I saw – I mean, the birds he

was working on, half of them didn't have bird clothes on, they were just sticks with like – what do you call it?

VC: Right. Little servos for movement, or something?

EP: No, no, no. Well, yeah. No, they could have, but they weren't moving. It was like where you stick –

VC: Oh, like a Tinker Toy?

EP: Yeah, like a Tinker Toy, exactly. They were just Tinker Toys sitting there with bare sticks of wood – or metal, really – into circular joints. So that's what he was working – he was developing what you were just talking about, which was that singing bird thing.

VC: It's an amazing thing.

EP: But that Walt reacted in that way. He really got angry at my host, which was embarrassing, of course, to him.

VC: Yeah. Well, thanks for that one, too.

EP: You're welcome. That's my one account of Walt Disney.

VC: That's a good one.

[end]